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ABSTRACT

Competency in the three skills areas of reading, writing, and mathematics is a requirement for high school graduation in the state of New York. The writing competency requirement consists of two tests: the Preliminary Competency Test in Writing, given to students in the eighth or ninth grade, and the Regents Competency Test in Writing, given to eleventh grade students. The Regents test, with its required multiple writing samples, poses a number of problems, the most outstanding being a standard approach to evaluation. The Regents test uses exemplary model answers and a set of criteria derived from the exemplary models. Each of the three samples must be rated by a different teacher, with the three ratings averaged to determine the test score. All tests with a 60% mean or above are rerated by the State Education Department to maintain a uniform statewide graduation standard in writing. Several things have been learned through the difficult process of developing the competency test in writing, including the facts that a statewide testing program can be implemented and can create a positive instructional thrust within the schools, that much more needs to be learned about the writing process and the products students produce in a testing situation, and that schools must establish a writing program that includes all disciplines and grade levels. (HTH)

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A WRITING TEST: A SEARCH FOR COMPETENCY

THE NEW YORK EXPERIENCE

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The Competency movement with its various tests has an intimidating effect on many and is considered an imposition from an outside force which dictates standards that in reality may not mean very much. This competency movement can be explained by a number of factors.

The community served by educational institutions has developed a number of concerns related to standards set by these institutions. The graduating student who lacks competency in skill areas such as reading, writing, and mathematics raises questions in the mind's of the community about the worth of the educational experience. The community also questions the significance of the diploma and the future of students who lack proficiency in skill areas.

Business organizations which hire high school graduates complain bitterly about the inabilities of recent graduates. They complain that these students cannot read, have difficulty expressing anything in written form, and lack computational skills considered elementary. As a result, many business companies establish their own educational programs to help employees overcome such deficiencies.

The college admission officers declare that the recent high school graduate is not what he/she once was. Statistics are cited which show a decline in SAT scores and the overall inability of many students to function at the expected college level. To combat this problem, colleges have established remedial courses for these incoming students.

Overheard conversations in any secondary school faculty room suggest that student performance is not what it once was, and reasons are given to explain this phenomena. Parents, too, have a growing concern about the quality of education that their children are receiving and that they, the parents, are financing through increased taxes. The political environment with its swing toward conservatism supports the growth of the competency movement in the country.

The questions raised above can be legitimately answered, but none of the answers given have completely eliminated the growing concern that students are not performing as well in certain areas as they might. As a result, over 30 states have moved toward a competency testing program of some sort. New York State is no exception and has in place a competency program in three skill areas - mathematics, reading, and writing.

The focus of the material which follows is on the competency test in writing.

Test Development

New York State has a long history of test development and test administration. The Regents Examination program has been operative for a 100 years and the developmental process for an examination, no matter what its content is basically the same.

The content unit, in this case the Bureau of English Education, and the Bureau of Test Development, share the responsibility for the development of the test. In addition, consultants and committees which represent the schools assist in this test development. Once test items have been developed, the Education Department pretests the items and reviews the results. Items must be pretested before they can be used on an actual examination. If there is a new examination introduced within the state which will have far reaching effects, (and the competency tests are good examples) the Commissioner of Education holds regional hearings which focus on the new testing program.

The first competency test to evaluate students' writing skills was the Basic Competency Test in Writing which was not successful and met with the criticism that it was too easy. The BCT in Writing followed the format so often found in a writing test. There was a section in spelling, mechanics, sentence writing, and a section which required three short written pieces --a response to a picture, a letter, and a paragraph on a given topic. As a result of the dissatisfaction with the BCT in Writing and a rethinking of the focus of the competency test, work on a new test of writing skills began.

The Bureau was quite fortunate to have Dr. Charles Cooper as a consultant through the early stages of the new test's development. After much discussion, questioning, and thought, the Department staff decided that the new competency test in writing would require three writing samples -- a business letter, a report from given data, and a composition of persuasion. It was recognized that these three writing tasks did not encompass the full range of discourse modes but did include some of them plus a type of writing which many people are required to do. The inclusion of purpose and audience established a communication framework for each writing task.

In the test development process, the units involved convene a Steering Committee which is comprised of representatives from the various school types found in the state -- large urban areas, small cities, suburban, rural, and nonpublic. Language arts supervisors, department heads, personnel with extensive teaching experience in languages arts, make up this committee. This committee advises, reviews possible test items, generates test items if necessary, discusses the examination impact on instruction and the school scene in general, and directly links the State Education Department to the schools.

For the development of the writing test, the Department had a national advisory panel which included those cited below.* The members of this group brought to the State Education Department the expertise that their names suggest. Membership on this panel should not be construed by the reader to mean endorsement per se of the writing test and that was not the function of the panel. Rather the group was to bring the best thinking related to writing and its evaluation to the Department.

Intially for this writing test, staff of the units involved and members of the Steering Committee developed test items. The next step was to pretest the items. Pretesting is done with a sample student population which approximates school and student types found in the state. Department staff and consultants review the pretest material when it is returned to the Department. Those involved examine items to determine (1) if there are any internal problems with the item, (2) if students can respond to the task, and (3) what types of response the items elicit.

As a result of this pretest review, items may require further pretesting; but when the items are as good as they can be made, they are available for test use. Staff members of the Bureau of English Education "pull" the test which will be administered to designated students throughout the state. Department staff, the Steering Committee, and the Examination Review Board which is comprised of school administrators from throughout the state review the test before its administration.

Competency in the three skill areas became a diploma requirement for students graduating from the secondary schools of New York State - a requirement beyond those which already existed. The program to determine this competency in writing consists of two tests - the Preliminary Competency Test in Writing and Regents Competency Test in Writing. Administration of the PCT takes place in grade 8 or 9 depending upon local school district decisions. The test itself requires three writing samples from the student — a letter of order, a report from given data, and a piece of persuasion. This test serves as a screening instrument to identify those students who will need some instructional focus on writing before they are required to take the RCT in grade 11.

For those students who receive less than 65% on the PCT, remediation is mandated by the State. Parents must be informed of the student's score, its implications, and the school's plan for remediation. Schools are required to maintain individual records for all students requiring remediation. The records for each student must include: diagnostic data, an accurate description of the remediation program including the teaching strategies and materials used, time spent on remediation, and student attendance.

The PCT provides just one means to analyze a student's writing problems, and it is equally important to analyze the student's writing process as well as other writing samples from the student.

In evaluating the student's writing process, the evaluator needs to gather some information about the student's history as a writer, how much practice the student has had, how much the student knows about the writing process, for what audiences the student has written, and does the student know his or her strengths and weaknesses.

With an analysis of the student's writing samples, the evaluator can look at those samples in several ways, but the analysis should reveal something about the ability of the student to handle the rhetorical task and the student's ability to organize the written piece. Analysis will give information about the student's word choice, syntax, and mechanics. The analysis of three specific pieces of writing required on the test plus information gleaned from other sources of information related to the student should provide valuable information to help the student overcome difficulties that he or she may have as a writer.

Students who receive less than 65% on the PCT, as stated earlier, must be given remediation to help overcome any deficiencies noted. The Regents Competency Test in Writing must be taken by those students required to do so beginning in January of grade 11. The test (a new one each time) is offered three times a year — in January, June, and August. A student may take the test as many times as necessary until he or she reaches the age of 21. Students may also fulfill the writing competency requirement in ways other than through the RCT in Writing. These include a passing grade on the Comprehensive Examination in English or with

a designated score on the Scholastic Aptitude Test or the American College Testing Program. Special provisions are made also for students whose native language is not English and for students with handicapping conditions. More information about these special provisions is found in the informational materials available with the tests.

The RCT requires three writing samples also -- a business letter of complaint, a report from given data, and a piece of persuasion. The Department provides schools in the state with a listing of 25 topics for each task on the RCT from which test items will be derived. In other words, there are no surprises waiting for the student at test-taking time. This coupled with the multiple opportunities for taking the test, early identification, and mandated remediation eliminates the accusation that students' diplomas hinge solely on taking a test on a one shot deal.

Evaluation of the Writing Test

The writing test with its required multiple writing samples poses a number of problems, the most outstanding being perhaps a standard approach to evaluation. Much has been written about reliability of rating when one evaluates written compositions. Much discussion focused on this topic in the development of the test. The Department adopted the method of scoring the papers for total effect. Such a method does provide reliabiltiy and tends to reduce the amount of time needed to do the task.

Unlike the holistic method used by Educational Testing Service, the evaluation of this writing test uses exemplary model answers (four for each task) which have a rating of 100% and a set of criteria derived from the exemplary models. Criteria for the zero papers are also established. Zero is defined as: (1) a blank paper, or (2) an illegible response, or (3) an incoherent response, or (4) a response totally unrelated to the given task.

Raters familiarize themselves with the task, write a response, examine the exemplary models, and internalize the criteria for them. They then compare the student's response to the models. The student's response is rated on a range of 0-100%. The rater responds with such a rating in no more than two minutes for each written piece. By comparing each written piece to exemplary models, the rater makes a judgment about the general level of writing ability indicated by each writing sample rather than making comparisons of writing abilities within the sample of student responses being rated.

Multiple scoring of the writing test is also required, and the minimum requirement is that each of the three pieces -- the letter, report, persuasion --must be rated by a different teacher. In other words, Teacher A reads the business letter; Teacher B, the report; Teacher C, the piece of persuasion. The three ratings are averaged to determine the student's test score. It is hoped that the averaging balances out inevitable differences in raters' judgments about the three writing samples. The Department suggests that if a student's test score is between 60% - 70% or if there are wide discrepencies among the three scores of the writing samples of the test that the test be rerated. This first rating is done in the local schools. Schools then submit all papers rated 60% - 100% to the Department, and the Department confirms or reverses the local rating. It is, however, the Education Department which determines whether the student passes the writing test.

Rerating of Papers

All RCT's in Writing for those students who obtain a mean score of 60% or above are sent to the State Education Department for review. At the Department, papers are rerated by personnel specifically selected and trained to rate the papers. The rerating is done in order to maintain a uniform statewide graduation standard in writing.

Those interested in doing this rerating must possess a bachelor's degree with a major or minor in English and must successfully complete the rigorous five hour rater performance test. This test consists of 31 writing samples which are actual student responses to the persuasion task of the RCT in Writing. These papers were carefully selected and represent the range of 0-100% papers. The writing samples are arranged in 31 booklets each containing six writing samples. Each sample appears in six different booklets and must be rated six different times for a total number of 186 ratings on the test. Applicants are trained in the rating procedures and are given the same directions and training that teachers in the schools receive.

In the performance test, the six scores assisgned to each of the 31 writing samples are the data used to assess the applicants consistency and ability to discriminate among the student writing samples. These statistics indicate if the applicant perfectly rank orders the 31 samples. A discrimination index indicates the degree to which the applicant is able to differentiate among the writing samples and thus use the full range of the scale. To determine the applicants consistency, all combinations of the 31 writing samples are taken 3 at a time. In addition, data are generated to indicate if the applicants exhibit confusion in judgment when comparing writing samples. All of the above — qualifications of the applicant and results of performance on the test described above — help select 30 raters from among the 100 plus who apply for the job.

Perceptions Gained

The development of the Competency Test in Writing has been an arduous and difficult task. The public information aspect of the task demanded much time and effort and has not been discussed in the material presented. The hours of discussion and the number of meetings which preceded each stage of development can only be alluded to in this discussion, and this presentation gives only the briefest overview of the program. The review does not capture the challenge, excitement, frustration, and reward experienced by those involved. Even at this writing, two years after the program went into effect, work remains to be done and refinement of the program continues.

The reader may want to know what has been learned through the development of this program, and the list which follows only gives a sampling of perceptions gained.

1. A statewide testing program can be put in place and can create a positive instructional thrust within the schools.

2. Tests, to some degree, can narrow the perception of what a writing program is or can be.

3. Much more needs to be learned about the writing process and the product students produce in a testing situation.

4. Development of the student as writer needs to begin early in the student's school experience.

5. Schools must develop a K-12 writing program which includes all disciplines.

6. Schools must establish ways to monitor students' progress in writing on a K-12 basis.

7. Teachers can be trained to evaluate papers using a particular procedure, and they can become reliable in using it.

8. A system can be established to review massive numbers of written compositions.

9. Much inservice work needs to be done with classroom teachers who have the responsiblity for teaching writing.

10. More information is needed about the student with handicapping conditions and the writing competency requirement.

The New York State attempt to evaluate the competency of students as writers cannot be described in the time or space provided in this paper. Discussion of the evaluation, selection of Department raters, and review of the tests by the Department demand more explanation than can be given here, but this overview attempts to give the readers a glimpse of what has been a mammouth and productive undertaking. (For more information, please contact the author at the New York State Education Department, Albany, New York 12234.)

* Arthur Applebee, Charles Cooper, David Dirlam, Gene Garber, Robert Gundlach, E. D. Hirsch, Bertram Koslin, Ina Mullis, Ellen Nold, Lynn Troyka, Ross Winterowd.

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